

School Violence Shifts Focus from Asbestos Risk

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When we talk about school “safety” these days, we mean shielding our children from guns, knives and teenage anger run amok. Metal detectors, early intervention, and trauma counseling make up the vocabulary of the day.

With the focus on keeping kids safe and sound, schools have temporarily lost sight of keeping their *buildings* environmentally safe and sound. Inspectors are finding that many schools are not complying with the rules on managing asbestos.

Violence may be an immediate and acute danger. But, asbestos exposure is long-term and more insidious.

Unlike the complex and overwhelming challenge of how to eliminate the threat of school violence, eliminating the threat of asbestos contamination is easy, cheap and gets tangible results. I urge administrators to learn the facts on asbestos and follow the simple guidelines on managing it.

Asbestos is the name for a group of natural minerals that separate into strong, very fine fibers. Its heat resistance and durability has made asbestos very useful in construction, including school construction. When asbestos ages and crumbles, it releases microscopic fibers that stay airborne for a long time. People can inhale the fibers, which penetrate the lungs and lodge there permanently causing diseases that may not appear for 10 to 30 years after exposure.

As with violence, there is no safe level of asbestos exposure, so it should be avoided completely.

It was with this goal in mind that Congress passed the “Asbestos Hazard Emergency Response Act” in 1986 requiring schools to carry out a few simple measures to make sure that students are not being exposed to asbestos fibers.

- appoint an asbestos manager
- conduct an initial inspection using an accredited inspector
- develop an asbestos management plan and make it available
- remove crumbling asbestos using accredited contractors
- conduct periodic re-inspections
- provide training to maintenance and custodial staff
- maintain records

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Although the asbestos act was passed 14 years ago, many school administrators are still unaware of proper safety procedures. To help them get up to speed, EPA has launched a mid-Atlantic inspection initiative, aimed at schools that are not in compliance. Its goal is to educate not to blame. For the most part, penalties are not collected, rather they are applied to correcting the problems.

So far, EPA and state inspectors have visited more than 300 mid-Atlantic schools, starting in late 1998 through the present. They found that more than three-quarters of the schools were not complying with the asbestos regulations. The maximum penalty a school can be charged for this type of violation is \$5,500, but all of them negotiated lower settlements, applying the money toward compliance.

The EPA's ultimate goal in launching this initiative is not to collect penalties or point fingers. It is to ensure the health and safety of our children. Let's start with a threat we *can* control.

For more information on how to comply with the Asbestos Hazard Emergency Response Act, call EPA's mid-Atlantic customer service hotline at 1-800-438-2474.

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